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SUBJECT: NATO ROUNDTABLE REFLECTS ENTIRE NGO SPECTRUM

¶1. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Nearly 20 local NGOs and a dozen leading academics debated the pros and cons of Croatia's NATO candidacy at a March 13 roundtable organized by DEFIMI, a scientific research NGO focused on defense and security issues which receives some government funding. Participating NGOs ranged from defense and peace-related organizations to broad-based human rights groups. The gathering provided a lively and at times provocative audience for Croatia's Ambassador to NATO Davor Bozinovic, who focused on the humanitarian and economic benefits of NATO membership. Anton Tus, a retired general and former ambassador to NATO, provided the day's the most eloquent defense of the Alliance, outlining how membership will protect key Croatian national interests. While the agenda of many in the audience was anti-membership, the gathering kicked off a public debate and forced opponents to defend their often loosely-reasoned arguments against NATO. Organizers will hold similar roundtables in the coming months in Osijek, Rijeka, and Split. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

AMBASSADORS PROMOTE NATO MEMBERSHIP

¶2. Bozinovic served as the main GoC spokesperson for NATO alongside several pro-NATO academics. He presented NATO as a political and defensive alliance rather than a military organization, stressing the need to defend our common democratic values not just on our doorstep but elsewhere in the world. "We are not joining NATO to become involved in wars, but rather to escape war," he said. Among economic benefits, he pointed to the enormous trade relationship among NATO members, amounting to 1.3 billion euros per day. He also noted that U.S. investment in the Netherlands is higher than in Mexico and eight times higher than in China.

¶3. Tus, who served as Chief of the General Staff from 1991-92 and Croatia's first ambassador to NATO in 2001, focused on the Alliance's role in defending key Croatian national interests: territory, sovereignty, identity, and prosperity. He pointed to international terrorism as the leading threat to these interests and argued against those who continue to promote the Yugoslav model of non-alignment. "Political neutrality is no longer possible in today's world," he said. Non-alignment actually leads to less security, he argued, "and we lived through the results of such 'independence' in the 1990s."

NGOS CALL FOR CONSIDERATION OF POLICY ALTERNATIVE

¶4. NGO participants represented the full spectrum of Croatian civil society, included defense-related organizations such as the Atlantic Council and the Croatian Officers' and Generals' Assemblies, anti-war groups such as the Center for Peace, Non-violence, and Human Rights, and broad-based human rights organizations such as the Croatian Helsinki Committee and the women's NGO B.A.B.E. Key questions posed by NGOs included:  
- From what do we need to defend ourselves?

- What is the policy alternative to NATO membership? (and why doesn't the GoC talk about it?)
- What are the costs of NATO membership?

15. Several participating academics criticised U.S. operations in Iraq as a means of attacking NATO, playing on an oft-repeated myth that the USG will force Croatia to send troops to Baghdad once it is inside the Alliance. PolOff reminded them that Operation Iraqi Freedom was not a NATO mission and that NATO missions are established through consensus of all member states.

BRADKTE